Christ Our Brother
Matthew 4:1-11
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Communion: First Sunday in Lent
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How real, to you, is the man Jesus? That, I believe, is one of the serious theological questions which must be asked continually. "How real, to you, is the man Jesus?"

Not very, I would guess. In the sense that nothing is very real which occurred 2,000 years ago, we have trouble here. Historians tell us that we are locked into our own "historicity"; that only by supreme intellectual effort can we break away from our time, our situation, and see clearly the time and situation of someone who lived in the past. And so Jesus is not real to us in the same way that Alexander the Great, or Julius Caesar, or Herod are more like fairy tale characters than real men, like us in every way.

The reality of Jesus, however, is further diminished by the image given to him by the church, and thus, firmly instilled in the collective consciousness of our whole civilization. We thought about this a little last week: how Sunday School art portrays an ethereal, unearthly Christ. In his very fine little book, The Meaning of Christ, Robert Clyde Johnson punctuates the dilemma. "Our modern age has suffered from a somewhat nauseating tendency to sentimentalize this story, until at times it is distorted almost beyond recognition. A few years ago one of the Protestant denominations published a new hymnal for its children. The comment of one reviewer was significant . . . 'This book is preoccupied with lambs', he observed. 'It will not be surprising if, when the children who have used this book reach adulthood, they see little lambs hopping by whenever they hear a reference to Christianity.'" (p. 22) Johnson goes on to observe that most Christians have a mental image of Jesus that is somewhat "velvety".

He is not very real to us. We are caught by the imagery. He comes across as totally unreal. But on a deeper level we have trouble accepting and understanding his humanity, a humanity which was common with our own. I was invited to speak at a conference once on the Doctrine of the Incarnation and my listeners

gave me trouble only when we got into the humanity of Jesus Christ. By asking several loaded questions I discovered that a good number of them felt that Jesus knew the earth was round instead of flat. That is, he did not share the world-view of his contemporaries. Likewise they felt he was clairvoyant; he knew, ahead of time, everything that would happen to him. In the same view, many of them had trouble perceiving Jesus in terms of pain, anger, hunger, joy, impatience, and death.

I'm not sure I know why, but something in us is threatened by a Christ who is too real. People didn't like the image of Jesus in the Italian movie "The Gospel according to Matthew", because he was too much a man; he was too real. Far preferable, the blasphemous "Hollywood and Vine Jesus" who floats through the endless parade of Bible Bonanzas. I'm not sure I know why, but we don't want our Christ to be too much like us. Perhaps if he doesn't have much to do with the common life: perhaps if we can keep him at arms length, we will have sufficient justification for separating our faith from the rest of our lives; justification for affirming his Lordship on Sunday and then living the rest of the week as if it is a giant hoax to be taken with a grain of salt.

This is the first Sunday in Lent, the season in the church year when we recall the steady procession of events which lead inexorably to calvary. Christians have always felt that the most appropriate way to observe Lent is to participate in the suffering and sacrifice of Christ. Well, that cannot be done; the impact of his passion, his crucifixion and death, will be negligible, for any of us, until we begin to see this man as a man, one of us.

When he was about thirty years old Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. It was the turning point in his life. We don't know much about what happened before then. An educated guess is that Joseph, his father, must have died, and Jesus assumed the responsibilities of supporting his mother, brothers and sister, as a carpenter in Nazareth. In any case he was among a crowd of people who had gone out to hear a strange but compelling man by the name of John. He was one of the ones who stepped forward to be baptized in the waters of the river.

And with that experience Jesus knew himself appointed by God to a very special life. Immediately he did what most men would do under the circumstances. He went somewhere to be alone: to think: to reflect on the different roads ahead: to plan and decide. He went into the wilderness.

Actually it was a barren, rocky wasteland, and for the Jesus it was the very symbol of aloneness. Nobody was in the wilderness - but the evil spirits - He stayed there forty days, a Hebrew idiom meaning a very long time, and not to be understood literally. He was visited by the devil - again an image which was current in his day. The fact was that he was a man alone, alone with his humanity and the call of God.

Three options presented themselves. He was hungry. His people were hungry. A popular expectation of the Messiah's coming was that it would be a day of abundance. No one would ever be hungry again. Why not turn the stones into bread?

The people expected the miraculous. In fact it was commonly believed that the promised Messiah would arrive on the wings of angels and appear suddenly on the pinnacle of the Temple. Why not? Why not do it and then leap to the ground. His popularity would be a cinch. People would listen.

Judah was ripe for rebellion. In retrospect we can see that the right person, the charismatic revolutionary could well have organized an effective military revolt. Why not? Why not restore Judah to former glory? Why not be the kind of Messiah people wanted and expected.

Those are the thoughts of a man alone, reflecting on the possibilities ahead. None are outlandish. None are totally wrong. In each there is good. In fact, each of them is loaded, and properly the subject of a single sermon.

The important thing this morning is for us to see that he was there; that these options were very real to him; that each came from his own creative imagination; that he thought through each, struggled with it and then chose, as a man, not to do it. The important thing this morning is for us to see, in the words of the writer of Hebrews: "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we

all." [Heb. 4:15]

William Stringfellow has written very movingly about this event in the life of Jesus, [Free in Obedience] and has pointed out that there is far more going on here than "spiritual exercise and contemplation". This was Jesus Christ making common cause with all men. This was the man Jesus in the same wilderness as all of us, struggling with the world's symbols of success and power and influence, and then chosing to cast his lot with us, to be one with us, to be our brother.

The prophet, centuries before, posed the question, "who has believed what we have heard?" Well, when all the theological jargon is stripped away, when all the ecclessiastical trimmings are discarded we are left with this fantastic assertion - which indeed few believe. God is for us, not against us. He is our judge - but also our advocate. He is the jury, the prosecutor and also the defense. He is so much for us that in the man Jesus Christ he became one of us. In the life of that man he walked our roads and experienced our feelings, and got inside our skin, and felt our hurt - and died our death.

That's incredible - literally the unbelievable goodness of the Gospel. t was the philosopher Nietzsche, no believer himself, who observed that, "modern men, hardened as they are to all Christian terminology, no longer appreciate the horrible extravagance which lay in the formula; God on the cross'!" [Johnson, op cite p. 47]

I think he was right. The story of the man Jesus is not play; it is not divinely staged drama, with the main character simply pretending to be someone he was not. That is the worst heresy. He was for real - and his life for us - his life poured out for others - was a real life, common with our own.

We remember him thus in a simple little ceremony, which first occurred around a rough table as thirteen men ate their last meal together. We have felt constrained to decorate it lavishly - to use the finest linen and the best silver, to accompany it with creative adornment and mysterious ritual. And sometimes we have forgotten that it is a reminder of his humanity, and that as we serve each

other we are, in fact, serving the Christ who is one with us.

"This is my body. This is my blood.

Remember me as you do this."

Let us commune now with each other - and with Christ our Brother.

Amen